

The “Safety Net” Curriculum by Douglas B. Reeves, Ph.D.

What Is the Safety Net Curriculum?

The Safety Net is a very limited set of learning objectives organized for each grade and for each subject. It is not the total curriculum—just the “safety net” that every teacher should ensure that every student knows.

What Is the Purpose of the Safety Net Curriculum?

The purpose of the Safety Net is to empower teachers to make wise decisions about what is most important in the curriculum. The Safety Net is not a device to ignore everything else in the curriculum, but rather a mechanism to help teachers separate the critical elements of a curriculum from learning objectives that are less important. Different teachers will make different choices, depending on the needs of their students, about what they will cover outside of the Safety Net. But every teacher should ensure that every student understands the items inside of the Safety Net. The simple truth is this: few teachers ever cover the entire textbook or the entire curriculum. Often the decision about what to cover is based on sequence—we cover the items that are listed early in the curriculum document or textbook, and so we do not cover the items that are listed late in those documents. The Safety Net offers a better alternative: student learning of what is most important. The focus of the Safety Net is on learning, not on mere coverage. The Safety Net acknowledges that different teachers cover different curriculum in their classroom based on different interests and varying student needs. However, every student in the district deserves an equal opportunity for learning Safety Net standards. However different teaching approaches may be from one teacher to another, the Safety Net allows every student in the district an opportunity for learning what is most essential. From the teacher’s point of view, the Safety Net rejects the approach of some states that insist on micromanagement of daily lesson plans and district-imposed daily learning objectives. Rather, the Safety Net provides teachers with broad discretion on teaching and curriculum *provided that the students have achieved the Safety Net objectives.*

What's Wrong with the Standards and Curriculum We Already Have?

Many teachers and administrators have complained that traditional standards, curricula, and textbooks are too voluminous to have practical value. Some analysts, such as Robert Marzano of the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), have concluded that most states would require school years almost *double* their present length in order to adequately cover existing standards. The Safety Net provides focus so those teachers can have a common understanding of what is necessary for all students. The Safety Net specifically provides an emphasis on student learning of a few objectives rather than student exposure to many objectives.

How Did You Choose the Learning Objectives in the Safety Net?

Three questions guide the selection of Safety Net learning objectives:

1. **What endures?** In other words, what skills and knowledge will students gain that last from one academic year to the next? For example, the skill of constructing an informative essay is something that students need throughout their academic career. It is a skill that endures over time. The same cannot be said, for example, of the requirement that a student memorize the formula for the area of a trapezoid.
2. **What is essential for progress to the next level of instruction?** In a continuing dialog with teachers at all grade levels, we much determine what is essential for future success. For example, when eleventh-grade history teachers are asked what is essential for success in their classes, they rarely respond with items of historical knowledge that should have been memorized in middle school. Rather, they typically respond that students should have skills in reading and writing, knowledge of map reading, and an understanding of the difference between democracy and authoritarianism.
3. **What contributes to understanding of other standards?** The Safety Net should comprise "power standards"—that is, those standards that, once mastered, give a student the ability to use reasoning and thinking skills to learn and understand other curriculum objectives outside of the Safety Net. For example, in a middle school mathematics class, the properties of a triangle and rectangle might be in the Safety Net, because this understanding will allow students to comprehend information about other shapes—rhombus, trapezoid, parallelogram—that are outside of the Safety Net.

If Students Know the Safety Net Objectives, Can We Ignore All the Other Standards?

No. The state standards and district curriculum remain important guides for teachers in planning their instruction. However, few if any teachers will actually cover every element of every portion of state standards and district curriculum. To the extent that a teacher, by virtue of a careful analysis of the needs of students, covers less than the entire curriculum and state standards, the Safety Net provides a guide for the essential core curriculum that must not only be covered, but that the students must learn.